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ABSTRACT

Twelve Spanish-speaking adults learning English as a second language were tested using the Bilingual Syntax Measure and their errors were analysed. Eight of them were subsequently presented with their errors in written form and asked to correct them. The 12 adults produced a total of 451 errors, of which 20.6% were due to interference from Spanish, 60.3% were developmental and 19% were from other sources. There was no variation in the proportions of errors from different sources according to academic status: intermediate students produced 60.3% developmental errors and advanced students produced 60.2%. Most subjects, both intermediate and advanced, were only able to correct about half their errors. Their corrections of the "Is X" structure suggest that this error may be due to syntactic, rather than phonological, interference. (Author)

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ERROR ANALYSIS AND ERROR CORRECTION IN ADULT LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE.

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Abstract

12 Spanish-speaking adults learning English as a second language were tested using the Bilingual Syntax Measure and their errors were analysed. 8 of them were subsequently presented with their errors in written form and asked to correct them. The 12 adults produced a total of 451 errors, of which 20.6% were due to interference from Spanish, 60.3% were developmental and 19% were from other sources. There was no variation in the proportions of errors from different sources according to academic status: intermediate students produced 60.3% developmental errors and advanced students produced 60.2%. Most subjects, both intermediate and advanced, were only able to correct about half their errors. Their corrections of the 'Is X' structure suggest that this error may be due to syntactic, rather than phonological, interference.

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ERROR ANALYSIS AND ERROR CORRECTION IN ADULT LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE.*

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Introduction

There are two main positions on the source of errors in second language learning. One holds that errors are due to interference from the mother tongue. The other, the 'creative construction' theory, proposes that the processes used in acquiring a first or a second language are identical and that second language learners' errors will resemble those of a child learning the relevant language as his mother tongue. A third possibility is that at least some errors can be related neither to L_1 interference nor to L_2 developmental strategies. It has been proposed (Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1971; Nemser, 1971) that language learners develop interlanguage grammars, idiosyncratic dialects or approximative systems, and that errors will not necessarily be based on either the mother tongue or the target language.

These views need not be incompatible. In particular, interlanguage systems might involve errors based on L_1, L_2, and other forms. However, a strong view of the creative construction theory, as maintained by Dulay and Burt (1972, 1974) does hold that, in children below puberty who are learning a second language, almost all errors will be developmental. In support of this position, they found that only 4.7% of their child subjects' errors were due to interference, while 87.1% were developmental and the rest were 'unique' (Dulay and Burt, 1974). A weaker view of either of the two main positions, outlined above, would still, presumably, predict something about the proportion of errors to be expected from each source: if errors are due mainly to interference, one would expect more interference errors but if they are due mainly to developmental strategies, a majority of developmental errors should occur.

In error analysis, a difficulty arises in trying to assign source of error, especially as many errors seem to have multiple origins. Developmental errors are those which resemble forms produced by children learning the language in question as their mother tongue. For example, many learners of E.S.L. will produce 'the king food' instead of 'the king's food', where the absence of possessive /-'s/ is not due to interference but occurs in the speech of children learning English as their first language. Interference errors are ones which clearly reflect interference from L_1, for instance, forms such as 'I have hunger' produced by speakers whose source language is French or Spanish. Dulay and Burt (1974) class as ambiguous errors ones which might be due

to either source, such as 'Jose no wanna go', which, when produced by a Spanish speaker, could be either interference or developmental. Unfortuately, there appears to be no way, at present, to decide which source is operating in such cases or whether both are.

A further problem occurs in trying to analyse interlanguage errors, by which I mean ones not due to L_1 or L_2. Indeed, as Frith (1975) points out, it is very difficult to discover what the proponents of interlanguage systems consider to be the characteristics of such systems. It is not clear what they would describe as interlanguage errors, whether they would expect such errors to be systematic or idiosyncratic and what proportion of them might be expected.

Because of such difficulties with error analysis, some researchers (Krashen and Pon, 1975) have abandonned the attempt to find sources of errors altogether. Assuming, however, that analysis by source is still possible, it would be interesting to find out how adults perform as regards error production. If the creative construction theory is correct, should adults also be expected to produce a high proportion of developmental errors? This study was undertaken partly to find out what proportion of adults' errors would be developmental, assuming (from observations on teaching adults) that a greater proportion than 4.7% would prove to be interference errors, and to see if any common interlanguage forms would occur.

Other people who have analysed adult errors have found both developmental and interference errors present. Taylor (1975) suggests that beginners may have to rely more on their source language in formulating hypotheses about the target language grammar, whereas more advanced students could be expected to have reached a stage where they are capable of making generalisations based on the target language itself. He found that beginners made more interference errors than intermediate students. The fact that students may use different learning strategies at different stages of acquiring a language could have implications for language teaching and it would be useful to know if there are similar differences between intermediate and advanced students, a point which is investigated in this study.

It is also possible that sources of errors are relevant for studies of the ability to correct errors. Krashen and Pon (1975) found that an adult advanced E.S.L. student could correct 95% of her errors immediately after production if utterances containing the errors were presented to her.

Krashen (1975) proposes that adult learners acquire language in ways similar to children ('naturally') and that they also learn language more consciously by more formal teaching methods. What they learn is used to monitor their language production, given situations where they have occasion to monitor, such as in written work as opposed to informal conversation. Where monitoring is not possible, the errors that occur tend to be developmental (i.e. related to acquisition). It is of interest to find out whether this implies that developmental errors are actually harder to monitor than those from other sources.

The problems of trying to ascribe errors to different sources have already been mentioned. Even if one can definitely describe an error as due to interference, there may still be difficulties in deciding whether the interference is phonological, syntactic or semantic. Error corrections may be useful in determining the precise form of interference, for instance in deciding between phonological and syntactic origins. This is crucial for the creative construction theory which refers to syntactic errors when it claims that most errors will be developmental. An error due to phonological interference is not considered a counter-argument to the theory.

One error which is common amongst Spanish learners of English occurs in the structure: Pronoun - be - X, where the subject pronoun is omitted, to give forms such as:

is crazy too

is the man's mop

is washing the floor

Most commonly, the omitted pronoun is 'it' but it may also be 'he', 'she' or 'they'. Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1975) suggest that in the case of 'it' omission the interference is probably phonological. They reject the idea that it is due to syntactic interference from Spanish which allows a subject NP to be omitted, given a clear context. Instead, they suggest that it may arise because in Spanish 'It's X' would be expressed as 'Es X', with phonological similarity leading Spanish speakers to say 'Is X' in English. As evidence, they show that subjects produce 'is' instead of 'it's' in imitation tasks and when they asked their subjects orally to correct sentences of the form 'Is X', they would insert 'he' or 'she' if possible but would otherwise repeat the same form i.e. they would give 'Is a book' as a correction of 'Is a book', as though they thought that they had in fact made a correction. Evidence from written, rather than spoken, error corrections may help to clarify this issue.

There are, then, several problems in the field of adult second language learning as far as error analysis and error correction are concerned. The present study seeks to follow up some of the issue raised by previous investigations in this area and to suggest further research.

Method

The subjects were 12 Spanish-speaking students from Venezuela who were studying at Concordia University, Montreal. They arrived in Canada in June 1975 to undertake a year's intensive study of English, before going on to study sciences elsewhere in Canada. At the time of testing, eight months later, they had reached various levels of proficiency, falling into two main groups, intermediate and advanced. Their average age was 20 years. None of them spoke any languages besides Spanish and English. Most of them had had some formal instruction in English at school in Venezuela but were unable to speak it on arrival in Canada.

The students were tested using the Bilingual Syntax Measure, or BSM (Burt, Dulay and Hernandez, 1973). The BSM consists of cartoon pictures, accompanied by questions for the experimenter to ask. It elicits natural speech containing a range of syntactic structures. The subjects' responses to the BSM were taped and their speech samples later transcribed. All morphological and syntactic errors were analysed in terms of whether they were due to interference from Spanish or to developmental strategies (by comparing the data with samples of child language from Bloom, 1971, Brown, 1973 and Menyuk, 1971). Errors which could not be clearly classified as one or the other were counted as ambiguous if the error could have been either interference or developmental, or as due to other causes. This last category includes what Dulay and Burt (1974) call 'unique' errors, ones which might perhaps be examples of interlanguage errors and others that were difficult to classify because of lack of relevant data from acquisition. Included in the developmental errors are those which occur in the English of speakers of many different language backgrounds, such as those listed by Richards (1971). Such errors usually coincide with the developmental forms produced by children learning English as a first language but, occasionally, there is no data from mother tongue learners to attest these forms as truly developmental. (See Appendix for examples of how different errors have been classified).

Eight of the above subjects (the other four being unavailable) were then presented with some of their errors in the form of written sentences and were asked to correct them.

This took place 1 or 2 weeks after the original taping. They were given as much time as they wanted to make corrections. Included with the sentences containing their errors were some of their correct utterances, so that they were asked to make a judgment on the grammaticality of each sentence and to correct the ungrammatical ones. They were only given errors to correct which did not depend on their remembering the original context of the BSM pictures; in other words, the error was clearly in the morphology or syntax of the sentence in front of them. Their corrections were then examined to find how many errors from each source they had been unable to correct.

Results

a) The total corpus consisted of 579 utterances (defined as sentences or phrases, both complete and incomplete). Each subject spoke for about 10 minutes and produced an average of 48.25 utterances. The total number of correct utterances was 243. The incorrect utterances often contained more than one error. Of the errors, 93 were ascribed to interference, 272 were developmental, 37 were ambiguous and 49 were 'other'. This makes a total of 451 errors, of which 20.6% were interference, 60.3% developmental and 19% were due to other factors (including ambiguities).

b) Major types of error (grammatical categories in which more than 12 errors occurred) are given below in Table 1. The number of correct forms in the total corpus is also given for each structure, where possible. The category 'other' includes ambiguous errors in this and subsequent tables, since their number was small.

Table 1. Error types by grammatical category

Grammatical category	Developmental errors	Interference errors	Other errors	Total correct
a. Possessives	21	19	8	48
b. NP-be-predicate	15	3	0	155
c. Tense	85	0	0	
d. Word Order	0	9	5	
e. Articles	25	0	6	
f. It-be-X	0	37	0	15
g. NP Ving	20	1	0	69
h. Omission of plural	37	0	0	51
i. " 3rd sing. /s/	36	0	0	33
j. Verb + infinitive	7	0	7	30
k. Prepositions	5	9	5	26
l. Agreement	7	2	19	30

c) Certain errors occurred which might be examples of interlanguage forms not due to L_1 or L_2. In the possessive structure (e.g. the thin man's house), the following forms were obtained from two subjects:

the thinner house (meaning 'the thin man's')

fatter man sandwich (" 'the fat man's')

man fatter's (" 'the fat man's')

d) Table 2 gives the sources of errors of individual subjects according to their academic standing, intermediate or advanced, based on class tests, Michigan scores and the class levels they were enrolled in at the time of testing. As can be seen from the totals, the intermediate group made 20.1% interference errors, while the advanced group made 20.5%. The former made 60.3% developmental errors, the latter 60.2%. The advanced group as a whole made approximately half as many errors as the intermediate group.

Table 2. Individual errors by academic status

Subject	Status	Developmental	Interference	Other	Total
1.	Intermediate	37	9	3	49
2.	"	35	6	16	57
3.	"	30	13	13	56
5.	"	29	9	10	48
10.	"	18	9	2	29
12.	"	35	17	14	66
	Totals	184	63	58	305
4.	Advanced	25	5	4	34
6.	"	7	3	5	15
7.	"	19	4	5	28
8.	"	14	10	5	29
9.	"	18	4	4	26
11.	"	5	4	5	14
	Totals	88	30	28	146

e) Tables 3 and 4 record the results from error corrections. They show how many errors the subjects were unable to correct when presented with the errors in written form.[1] The number uncorrected is given in each case out of the total number of errors of that type/source which were presented for correction. Table 3 gives errors not corrected by grammatical type. Four categories were considered: morphological errors (e.g. inflections), syntactic errors (e.g. word order), lexical errors (e.g. wrong use of vocabulary) and omissions (e.g. of pronouns or verb forms). Subjects corrected more morphological and omission errors than syntactic and lexical ones.

Table 4 gives errors not corrected by source. In almost all cases, subjects were only able to correct about half their errors, if that. Advanced students were no better at error correction than the intermediate group. There is no significant difference (.05 level, T-test) between the percentage of interference and developmental errors not corrected. Some subjects corrected sentences which were in fact already correct but this only occurred 4 times out of 63 correct sentences presented.

Table 3. Errors not corrected by grammatical type

Type	Errors not corrected
Morphological	49/102
Syntactic	16/22
Lexical	10/11
Omissions	20/43
Total	95/178

Table 4. Errors not corrected by source

Subject	Status	Developmental	Interference	Other	Total not corrected	Total corrected
1.	Intermed-iate	9/18	4/7	1/4	14	15
3.	"	9/17	6/10	5/7	20	14
5.	"	9/24	7/8	4/4	20	16
10.	"	6/14	2/6	0/1	8	13
6.	Advanced	0/4	1/2	3/5	4	7
7.	"	5/10	2/2	1/3	8	7
9.	"	6/7	4/4	3/4	13	2
11.	"	5/8	3/7	0/2	8	9
	Totals	49/102	29/46	17/30	95/178	83/178

f) There were 43 cases of pronoun subject omission in the data, of which 37 involved omission of 'it' and the rest were omission of 'he', 'she' or 'they'. Examples of omissions that occurred are:

is very funny ('it' omitted)

is his sandwich "

is happy ('she' omitted)

is run away "

There was also one case which, unlike the rest, did not involve the verb 'be'. This was:

doesn't like the food ('he' omitted)

From the examples, it can be seen that pronoun deletion occurs before both copula and auxiliary 'be'. The structure 'It is X' was also used correctly 15 times in the data.

When the 8 subjects were given their errors to correct in written form, between them they had 22 occasions to correct an 'Is X' structure. 7 of these were corrected by inserting 'it', 4 were corrected by inserting other pronouns and 11 were not corrected at all. Thus, 50% of the 'Is X' forms went uncorrected.

Discussion

The method of analysing the subjects' errors here differs from Dulay and Burt in one major respect. They rejected all structures which produced any ambiguous errors and were left with 6 structures to consider, namely:

1. NP V Pronoun e.g. the dog ate it
2. Det. Adj. N e.g. the skinny man
3. Pron (aux) (neg) VP e.g. he doesn't eat
4. Det. N Poss N e.g. the king's food
5. NP be Adj e.g. they are hungry
6. NP aux V ing (infin) NP PP / NP NP e.g. the mother is giving food to the birdie

Some of these structures led to the production of ambiguous errors by my subjects whereas others did not. Furthermore, only (4) led to the production of more than 12 errors. However, if one looks in more detail at Dulay and Burt's examples for each structure, one finds that they can be generalised. Thus, for (1) above, they give:

Example of developmental error: (the) dog eat it

Example of interference error: (the) dog it ate

In other words, the developmental error can contain an error of tense, omission of the article and 3rd person singular /s/ loss. My subjects made very few such errors in this particular structure but they made 85 tense errors in the whole corpus, consisting mainly of using present for past as in the above example; they

made 18 errors with articles and 36 omissions of 3rd singular /s/. The example of an interference error contains a word-order error. The subjects produced only one word-order error in the structure (1) but 13 others elsewhere in the corpus. If one examines Dulay and Burt's examples for the remaining five structures, the same situation occurs: an error which is given by them as an example for a restricted structure occurs, in the present study, much more frequently outside that structure. This is why Table 1 deals with more general categories of error than are found in Dulay and Burt's experiment. This more general approach may be the reason why there is a higher proportion of interference errors in the data of my experiment: it has seemed important to analyse the total corpus and not just certain structures within it. Thus, in part, Dulay and Burt's finding of a high proportion of developmental errors appears to be due to their method of selecting structures for error analysis.

Nevertheless, this experiment seems to support a weak view of the creative construction theory, in that adults, like children, make developmental errors and therefore, presumably, share some of the language learning processes that children have. It does not support a strong view, since over 20% of errors were due to interference.

As far as interlanguage errors go, it was difficult to tell whether the errors which were classified as 'other' were really examples of interlanguage forms unrelated to L_1 or L_2. The 'other' errors which occurred in the data tended to be unique. They may have contained evidence of individual idiosyncratic systems but no trends were visible. Indeed, it is questionable whether the study of individual systems will be particularly useful as far as determining general language learning strategies is concerned. Of more interest is the question whether learners produce common approximative systems whose forms do not resemble L_1 or L_2. There were few errors which seemed to point to such a possibility. The errors with possessive forms mentioned in paragraph (c) of the results may be such a case but the incidence of them is very slight.

It is possible that a number of errors which are classified as developmental are not, in fact, developmental at all. Richards (1971) includes in his list of developmental errors ones which are common to speakers of many different mother tongues. Some of these are not attested for children learning English as a first language. The lack of support from child first language acquisition is usually taken as accidental but this may not be the case. Such errors might be genuine interlanguage forms, due neither to interference nor developmental strategies. For instance, certain errors with prepositions that occur in the speech

of adults with many different mother tongues do not appear to be the same as the errors children make in acquiring prepositions. The latter tend to omit, whereas the adults tend to make inappropriate use of prepositions. In these, and other, cases, I may have counted too few interlanguage errors and too many developmental ones by accepting Richards' classification of developmental errors. In the absence of clear definitions of interlanguage systems and errors, such confusions seem inevitable. In any case, it may well turn out that errors unrelated to interference or developmental forms are scarce and that interlanguage systems mainly reflect L_1 or L_2, which seems to be supported by the data here.

The results relating source of error to academic status (Table 2) are interesting in the light of Taylor's (1975) findings. In a translation task, he found that beginners and intermediate students made errors from the same sources but that the beginners had a higher proportion of interference errors. In the present study, the results with intermediate and advanced groups support the first part of Taylor's findings, in that both groups produced developmental and interference errors. However, there was no difference in the proportion of interference errors made, whereas Taylor's results might have led one to predict that the intermediate group would produce a higher proportion of interference errors than the advanced students. It might, perhaps, be that, by the time students are past the initial stages of language learning where they have to rely more on their mother tongue due to lack of experience in the second language, they level out at a certain proportion of interference errors regardless of academic standing, so that the only difference between the intermediate and advanced groups is in the number of errors that they make.

The data from error corrections show that morphological and omission errors were more readily corrected than syntactic and lexical ones (Table 3). In the case of the two former categories, subjects were able to correct about half their errors, whereas in the latter two cases very few errors were corrected. As far as error correction by source is concerned (Table 4), there was no difference in subjects' abilities to monitor developmental or interference errors. Thus, though Krashen (1975) has observed that developmental errors tend to occur when monitoring is not taking place, subjects do not seem to find them particularly difficult to correct, when given a chance to monitor them retrospectively.

Table 4 also shows that the advanced group were unable to correct more than about half of their errors. This differs from

Krashen and Pon's (1975) observation that an advanced learner was able to correct 95% of her errors. In the present experiment, the subjects had their errors before them in written form, with unlimited time to correct them, which should have given an advantage to their monitoring systems. (They also had a gap of 1-2 weeks between production and correction. This might have been a disadvantage in that the errors were no longer fresh in their minds but it would probably have been offset by the fact that their English might have improved slightly in that period, so that they could perhaps have corrected more than they would have been able to originally). Krashen (1975) does say that he would expect monitoring abilities to differ in adults (depending on how much learning as opposed to acquisition of L_2 they have experienced) and he reports one subject who seemed unable to monitor at all. Subject 9 in Table 4 seems to be a similar case.

The advanced group were no better at error correction than the intermediate students. One might well expect them to be better at it but this would only be so if it could be shown that the advanced group had learned more (which is necessary for monitoring) rather than acquired more. In the case of the groups studied here, both had had much the same quantity and quality of formal instruction and it may be that the advanced group had been able to acquire more English outside the classroom situation. However, if developmental errors are due to one's acquired system, as Krashen suggests, and if the advanced group had acquired more than the intermediate group, then they should have shown a higher proportion of developmental errors. This is not the case: the two groups make almost identical proportions of developmental errors (Table 2). It seems, then, that more work is necessary on the operation of the monitor at different stages of language acquisition/learning.

The final point investigated in this experiment was the type of interference occurring in the 'Is X' structure. If 'Is X' derives from phonological similarity to 'Es X', then one might expect that the subjects would be able to correct their error when confronted with it in writing, since they are no longer working with the sounds involved, so that phonological interference should not occur. However, only half the 'Is X' structures were corrected, suggesting true syntactic interference from Spanish, where subject pronoun omission is permitted in unambiguous cases. Also the theory of phonological interference from 'Es X' cannot explain the omission of 'he', 'she' or 'they', which also occurs, though much less frequently than 'it' omission. It appears that the omission of any pronoun subject is due to the same cause, namely syntactic interference from Spanish.

In order to rule out the possibility of phonological interference occurring with written forms, for instance if the students were sounding out the words to themselves, it would be necessary to test whether students could correct an error which was clearly phonological when it was presented to them in written form. As the errors presented to the students for correction in the present study were syntactic and morphological, I was unable to test this point.

Conclusion

This study confirms that adult language learning processes seem to have much in common with child language acquisition, at least as far as the source of the errors produced is concerned. Nevertheless, the sizeable proportion of interference errors which occurred suggests that these will still have to be something for teachers of adults to bear in mind. The results from error correction suggest that the idea of a monitoring system needs further investigation, to establish how it can be developed and how students can be helped to make use of it. Further investigation of error corrections may also help to establish which structures students find particularly hard to correct, i.e. which they fail to monitor, and may suggest areas that language teachers might concentrate on in remedial work.

Footnotes

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1. In 'unable to correct' I include the following three types of response:

a) The error was not recognised by the subject, who ticked the structure as correct. This occurred in 78 out of 95 cases of errors not being corrected.

b) Subjects seemed to feel that a structure was incorrect, as shown by the fact that they marked it with a X, but they made no attempt at correction. This occurred 4 times, in all cases with intermediate students. (In fact, 3 of the 4 cases were produced by one subject).

c) Subjects marked a structure as incorrect but then made an incorrect correction of it. This occurred 13 times, 8 times by intermediate students and 5 times by advanced.

The incidence of cases (b) and (c), though the numbers involved are small, suggests that there may be occasions (a stage?) when the monitor is able to detect errors but is unable to correct them. As might be expected, this is more common with intermediate than with advanced learners.

Appendix

Examples of errors from the 12 subjects' utterances, to illustrate the categories of Table 1.

Example of error	Classification	Justification
a. Possessives.		
Food of the king	Interference	La comida del rey
The fat man house	Developmental	Mommy bat (Bloom)
The thinner house	Interlanguage	Neither interference nor developmental.
b. NP-be-predicate		
I have hungry	Interference	Yo tengo hambre
They noses	Developmental	That a horse (Brown)
c. Tense		
He take off his shoe (=took)	Developmental	No I see truck (Brown) (=saw)
d. Word Order		
He has a face very unhappy	Interference	El tiene una cara muy triste
He doesn't know where is the food	Ambiguous	No sabe donde esta la comida He saw where is the hat (Menyuk)
e. Articles		
I am eating sandwich	Developmental	There go doggie (Brown)
She likes the life ('the' should = ∅)	Ambiguous	Le gusta la vida the nature, the science (Richards)

Example of error	Classification	Justification
f. Pronoun-be-X		
Is possible	Interference	Es possible
It watching	Developmental	He playing a game (Menyuk)
He very fat	Developmental	He big (Brown)
g. NP Ving		
Is washing the floor	Interference	Esta lavando el piso
She thinking	Developmental	He playing a game (Menyuk)
She is sing	Developmental	We are live in this hut (Richards)
h. Omission of plural		
The house are dancing	Developmental	I have two shoe (Menyuk)
i. Omission of 3rd sing /s/		
He like to be thin	Developmental	There go one (Brown)
j. V + infinitive		
He can't to live there	Developmental	She cannot to go (Richards)
The dog wants eat	Ambiguous	El perro quiere comer I want draw it (Menyuk)
k. Prepositions		
She is thinking in love	Interference	Ella esta pensando en amor
One apple is in the floor	Ambiguous	Una manzana esta en el piso in T.V. (Richards)
l. Agreement		
Others are thins	Interference	Otros son flacos
She eats a lot (=he)	Developmental	He put on his boots (for 'she put on her boots' - personal observation)
She take off his shoes (=her)	Ambiguous	Ella saca sus zapatos Father took off her coat (=his; personal observation)

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